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## MANAGING FEAR IN THE WORKPLACE

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TQLO Publication No. 93-01

January 1993

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Published for the Department of the Navy by:

Department of the Navy

Total Quality Leadership Office

2611 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 2000

Arlington, VA 22202-4016

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### PREFACE

The ideas put forth in Managing Fear in the Workplace were first presented by Dr. Suarez in a speech before a Naval Supply Center Summit held in San Diego, CA, in April 1992. Total quality coordinators from various supply centers throughout the Western Region attended the summit and were enthusiastic about the subject.

The Naval Aviation Supply Office, Philadelphia, asked him to visit their organization in October 1992 to make the same speech. Also, in October, he made a similar presentation before attendees of the Fourth National Total Quality Symposium hosted in Dallas by Texas Instruments.

Why the interest in fear in the workplace? As the author points out, all of us have experienced fear at work at some time in our past, but we know very little about it--how it manifests itself and how it affects performance.

Dr. W. Edwards Deming tells us that dealing with the issue of fear at work is the responsibility of management, but to do so managers must first understand what it is. Dr. Suarez defines fear and then describes some common types of fear, such as fear of change. To help managers determine whether or not fear is actually present within their organizations, he poses some questions that managers can ask themselves in making that assessment.

Dr. Suarez also talks about the importance of leadership, building trust, and developing a vision statement to reduce fear among employees. A vision statement describes the aim of the organization and "can become the mechanism for pulling people together to work toward the desired future." It eliminates confusion about the future of the organization and instills confidence in employees that the leaders are thinking long term.

The viewgraphs used in the presentation on managing fear are included as an appendix to the report. Readers should feel free to use them in discussing the subject of fear in the workplace within their own organizations. (The viewgraphs are available in hard copy form only.)

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## INTRODUCTION

Quality experts such as W. Edwards Deming advocate the elimination of fear in the workplace so that employees can work effectively toward the aim of the organization/system (Deming, 1986). The elimination of fear is necessary to create an environment of trust and cooperation, essential ingredients to initiating and sustaining a total quality effort, pursuing continuous improvement, encouraging innovation, and achieving customer delight.

The removal of fear should be one of the first of Deming's 14 management obligations that top leaders address because of its impact on other obligations (Scherkenbach, 1986). Unfortunately, there is little guidance in the literature and in training courses to help managers deal with fear in their work environment.

Fear is an emotion that can never be completely eliminated. I propose that while fear at work may never be eliminated, it can be managed. I describe the impact that fear has on the individual as well as on the organization, and why fear is a barrier to Total Quality Leadership (TQL) implementation. I also describe events, actions, and behaviors that cause employees to experience fear at work, and examples of the effect of fear in an organizational setting. Finally, I offer alternative strategies that managers can use to manage fear and some partial solutions to this complex organizational phenomenon.

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## WHAT IS FEAR?

Managers trying to address the issue of fear in their organizations without an understanding of this elusive concept can only make things worse. Fear is an emotion usually associated with negative connotations. It is defined in the dictionary as an unpleasant, often strong emotion caused by awareness of danger (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1984). Fear is often confused with anxiety. The psychological literature shows no universal differentiation between these two states. However, most agree that fear and anxiety refer to an unpleasant feeling state accompanied by physiological, cognitive, and behavioral changes (Kleinknecht, 1986).

Most psychologists agree that fear is a response to a clearly identifiable and circumscribed stimulus. Anxiety, on the other hand, is a response to an unclear or ambiguous stimulus, which is

why it is so difficult for leaders to address. Anxiety is less intense, but typically long-lasting. Of the two, anxiety generally produces the worse effects. As Neave says, "With fear, one knows what one is up against, and can perhaps plan something to fight it. But anxiety has no focus, the cause is neither known nor understood" (Neave, 1990).

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#### WHY SHOULD LEADERS PAY ATTENTION TO FEAR?

Fear is a distracting force that robs employees and organizations of their potential. There is no such thing as "healthy" fear. Fear-based outcomes are usually negative and, in most cases, affect both organizational effectiveness and quality of work life. Fear is a barrier to individual and to organizational performance. Aguayo (1990) summarizes it this way: Fear is a motivator, but it doesn't motivate towards constructive action. It could produce intense short-term bursts of performance, but not better results. The efforts tend to be directed towards avoidance of the perceived danger.

Fear nourishes competition, and competition creates anxiety (Kohn, 1986). Competition fosters suboptimization (i.e., when the performance of one person or one process has a negative effect on the aim of the total system), destroys trust, and creates a chain reaction of negative behaviors.

Fear erodes joy in work, limits communication, and stifles innovation. Fear fosters short-term thinking as people search to avoid reprisal, perhaps at the expense of others in the system. In fear-based management cultures, people tend to focus on eliminating the threat instead of working to achieve the desired positive outcomes. There are numerous examples of employees who juggle data while monitoring the process to avoid repercussions from management (Deming, 1986). As Scherkenbach says, "With a combination of fear and ignorance people can virtually bring any process into statistical control" (Scherkenbach, 1987). That's one of the reasons why Deming says, "Where there is fear. . . there will be wrong figures" (Deming, 1986). In a data-based decision-making system, which TQL promotes, it is dangerous to rely on data that are contaminated by fear. This is why it is so difficult to address the technical problems of quality without addressing the social systems of the organization. As Edmund Burke said: "No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear" (Burke, 1756).

Nevertheless, the negative effects produced by fear are difficult to quantify. Perhaps the total economic cost of fear will always be an unknown. Many mistakenly believe that Deming says that if you can't measure it, you can't manage it. I don't think that is

what he is saying. In "Out of the Crisis" (page 121), he cites Lloyd S. Nelson, an expert in quality, who says, "Actually, the most important figures that one needs for management are unknown or unknowable but successful management must nevertheless take account of them." Fear is indeed one of those unknowables, and managers must take it into account.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGING FEAR

Fear is a fact of life. Everyone experiences fear one way or another. Even courageous people experience fear. Courage is not the absence of fear but the management of fear.

Fear is also present in every organization, and it will always be (Wilson & Edmondson, 1991). Fear can be to an organization what high blood pressure is to the human body. . . a silent killer! It can go unnoticed but its effects are devastating nonetheless. Ryan and Oestreich (1991), compare it to background noise, "going unnoticed until it interferes significantly with people's ability to communicate." If you are a leader in your organization, it is your responsibility to assess and acknowledge that fear is present. If you as a leader have any doubts that there is fear in your organization, just listen and observe how your people behave in meetings. Most of the behaviors that you will observe during a meeting can tell you a great deal about the culture of your organization in relation to fear at work.

What are the people in the organization afraid of? Most of the organizational fears are related to position, authority, power, and psychological and social factors of organizational life (Wilson & Edmondson, 1991). Let's take a look at some of the most common types of fear in organizations.

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#### TYPES OF FEAR

Fear of reprisal or receiving poor appraisals. This type of fear generates "please-the-boss," "look-good-at-any-cost," or "just-do-what-you're-told" behavior. Fear of being disciplined or receiving poor appraisals can lead to behavior that pleases the boss but at the expense of others, even customers (Lowe & McBean, 1989).

According to Lowe & McBean, fear of failure is tied to fear of reprisal because reprisal is usually an outcome of failure. Fear of failure is associated with lack of risk taking and innovation. According to Atkinson, "The tendency to avoid failure. . . functions to oppose and dampen the tendency to undertake achievement-oriented activities" (Atkinson, 1964). Defensiveness, skepticism, and apathy are behaviors of people who are avoiding failure.

\*Fear of success. Success brings enemies. People are afraid

that success may damage their relationships with their peers. People are afraid of the repercussions of success (e.g., being ostracized as a "rate buster"; jealousy; envy; higher expectations; fear of failure following a promotion).

\*Fear of math. TQL is data-driven, and data are typically analyzed using quantitative methods and tools. People with fear of math will transfer that fear to the use of the tools and methods associated with TQL. This kind of fear is also linked to fear of new knowledge. People afraid of math might be overheard to say, "These tools are good for my people, not for me," or "We don't have the time to learn all that."

\*Fear of change is also very common. With it, comes resistance to change and the attitude that "We've always done it this way, why change now?" People resist change, because they are generally content with what is familiar. Change may cause employees to fear that they are going to lose something; they feel that their power may be diminished. Change is seen by many as a threat to their security or some highly valued beliefs.

\*Fear of speaking up. If you are the messenger of problems you soon become the target of criticism. You are associated with complaints and problems. It is common to find people afraid of speaking up because of management's tendency to kill the messenger. According to George Benson, professor of management at the Minnesota Carlson School of Management, "We learn more from mistakes than from successes. When you've got people who are afraid to tell you they've made a mistake, you don't have a chance to learn" (Benson, 1991). Managers must forgive mistakes and should provide a forum so that everyone can learn from them and share them with others.

\*Fear of not making a mark on one's "watch" is widespread in many organizations, including those focusing on quality (i.e., TQL). Typically the focus of these organizations is short term because of their strong desire for instant gain. One of the reasons why it is easier to talk about how many employees were sent to training and how many process action teams are underway is that accomplishments are visible.

TQL implementation requires a significant investment in time, effort and resources. There are no shortcuts to help managers implement TQL and show results immediately. In fact, "any attempts to achieve results 'overnight' could easily lead to chaos and reduced productivity" (Houston, 1990).

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MANAGING FEAR

Acknowledging fear's presence is undoubtedly an important step. But how do you as a leader or manager know if there is fear in

your organization? I have compiled the following questions to help managers find an answer:

--Expectations

Do you know what your peers and subordinates expect of you? Has the organization published a statement of vision, mission, and guiding principles? Was it understood? How do you know?

--Assessment

Has the organization conducted an assessment to identify barriers that inhibit performance? If yes, has anyone taken action? Do you know what people in your organization fear?

--Perceptions

Do your peers or subordinates fear you? How do you know? Do you feel that your boss perpetuates fear? If yes, what are you doing to help him/her? Do you perceive that your people have to do things on the job that are against their better judgment?

--Trust

Do you trust your suppliers? Your customers? Do you believe that your subordinates trust you? Do you trust them?

--Communication

Are you asking for feedback? Are you listening? Are you killing the messenger? Do you paraphrase or restate what someone has said if it is not clear to you? Do you believe that your subordinates have all the information needed to carry out their jobs?

--Training

Do you believe that your subordinates are not fully qualified to handle their jobs? What have you done to make sure that your peers and subordinates acquire new knowledge and develop new skills? Do you inform them of opportunities for individual development and advancement?

These questions provide some basis for assessing the presence of fear in your organization. However, thinking about fear and collecting data about it do nothing if not followed by action. It is the responsibility of management to begin efforts to minimize and manage fear.

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## CREATING THE ENVIRONMENT

There are three elements that I think serve as catalysts in creating an environment in which people can cope with fear--leadership, trust, and vision.

--Leadership

"The job of the leader is to understand that the system is composed of people" (Deming Library, 1989). To minimize and manage fear, leaders must create an environment where employees can share information without concern about repercussions.

Leaders must respond to employees' concerns and ideas quickly. A lack of response sends the message that nothing here will change.

Also, lack of response makes employees wonder about their own credibility and competency. A quick response is the best incentive to keeping people communicating their concerns and their thoughts regarding a better way to do things. Leaders must reward cooperation and innovation. They must reward efforts as well as outcomes. They should reward those who contribute to the betterment of the system. Figure 4 (SEE HARDCOPY) describes some attributes of leadership that I consider to be consistent with the behaviors and knowledge necessary to minimize and manage fear in the workplace (Deming, 1989).

#### --Trust

Deming says that fear will diminish as leadership improves and as employees develop confidence and trust in it. Creating trust is not easy. Trust is a delicate construct that takes many years to build and just one act to destroy. Trust is a necessary condition for cooperation and for communication. Trust improves and encourages communication. People will be confident that their ideas will be dealt with responsibly, will not be rejected without careful consideration, and will not result in repercussions to them or others (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). In general, the higher the trust, the more open the communication, and the more stable and predictable the cooperation. On the other hand, low trust leads to uncertainty and defensive behaviors.

In the spirit of building trust, managers must share their mistakes with others as a signal that mistakes are considered opportunities for learning. Leaders can set the tone that when there are no mistakes reported, they will be skeptical! Lack of bad news may be a sign of fear in the workplace. Managers should not kill the messengers; better yet, messengers should be rewarded.

In their communications, managers should avoid questions that ask for "yes" and "no" responses. These questions do not allow employees to express their views and they can create an atmosphere of defensiveness.

It is the leader's job to find out what generates fear in the organization. In addition to listening to and observing the signs of fear, management should take the lead on speaking up about fear. Broaching the subject of fear informally (e.g., sharing with others one's personal experiences of failure at work) gives managers a chance to monitor people's perceptions and plant the seed that it is okay to talk about fear.

When people do speak up, leaders must listen, paraphrase, and collect data before passing judgment on employees' suggestions and actions. It is common to shoot from the hip and react to

what the employee is saying. A leader who manages fear effectively is patient and understanding.

#### --Vision

The value of developing a vision statement has been underestimated by many leaders. The process of developing a vision statement is as valuable as the outcome, because it forces leaders to take a broad look at themselves, their organization, and its future. The process of visioning provides the forum to initiate long-term thinking and planning.

A vision statement provides guidance to employees as to what and where the leaders of the organization perceive the organization will be in the future. It also gives employees the sense that the leaders of the organization are planning and taking action to be in business for many, many years, which in itself helps to reduce fear. According to Bennis and Nanus (1985), a vision statement instills confidence in employees and, if used as a communication tool, can serve to bring everyone together. According to Tichy and Devanna (1986), vision statements are the most essential component of transformation. They provide guidance and, in difficult times, "they help as an overarching framework to guide day-to-day decisions and priorities and provide the parameters for planful opportunism."

A vision statement, like a lighthouse, provides direction so everyone understands where the organization is going. It provides a positive image, something to strive for.

Deming (1991) says that without an aim there is no system. A vision statement helps to describe the aim and, if published and shared with everyone, can become the mechanism for pulling people together to work toward the desired future. A vision statement, along with its supporting plans and actions, eliminates confusion among employees about the future direction of the organization.

In summary, visions can serve as "fear busters" (Lowe & McBean, 1989). Visions provide "constancy of purpose," which can reduce uncertainty and fear. The key elements necessary to manage fear--leadership, trust, and vision--will create win-win dynamics throughout the organization.

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#### CAVEATS

Managers who expect dramatic results in minimizing and managing fear are destined to be disappointed. There are no quick fixes, and serious efforts to minimize fear must be continual. One must proceed slowly to make big changes when dealing with fear at work. Incremental progress, "baby steps," seem to take forever, but that is how a climate of trust is established. As I said before, it takes many years to build trust and one act to destroy



it, so false starts are too costly when dealing with the issue of fear. Managers should not push themselves into this arena if they are not seriously committed to making this a priority.

Managers committed to addressing the issue of fear must remember that awareness of the presence of fear and an understanding of the need to change towards an environment of trust and cooperation represent important first steps.

There are no examples of organization-wide cultural changes that minimized fear from the bottom of the organization. This is because only top management can establish the vision, only they can make policy or establish the set of core values for the organization. By virtue of this power, leaders have an obligation to communicate their efforts, lead by example, and build some success stories so others are willing and able to join them.

Finally, managers must understand that whether an organization grows or downsizes, succeeds or fails, new fears will surface, and they must be proactive in dealing with them. Even solutions to deal with fear can lead to new problems. On the other hand, top management cannot do it alone. This effort will require teamwork!

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#### SUMMARY

The benefits of managing fear are both personal and organizational. Those organizations which manage fear may benefit from lower turnover; lower absenteeism; fewer grievances filed; and better communication and coordination, both inside and outside the organization. Less time will be spent on defending against real and perceived threats, and process improvement and innovative work can flourish.

Managing fear is the right thing to do. After all, "All workers ask for is a chance to work with pride, to work without fear" (Deming, 1986).

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J. Gerald Suarez recently received a Ph.D. in industrial and organizational psychology from the University of Puerto Rico. He has been involved in quality management since 1985, when, as a graduate student, he conducted research on the implementation of the Deming management approach at Hewlett-Packard.

Gerald started his career as an industrial psychologist for a private consulting firm, focusing on quality management issues. In 1987 he joined the research staff of the Navy Personnel Research and Development Center (NPRDC) in San Diego, California, as a personnel research psychologist. At NPRDC, he was both instructor and consultant within the Department of the Navy and

the Department of Defense (DOD). He wrote a number of reports on TQM/TQL education, among them a report that describes a strategy for educating the DOD acquisition work force in TQL, and another that presents an education and training plan for TQL in the DOD. He also coedited a report of selected readings in TQL implementation.

Gerald received a Fleet Support Service award in 1991 for providing initial training to the TQL Fleet Teams formed by the Chief of Naval Operations to lead TQL demonstration projects in selected Fleet units. Gerald instructed them in team building and in the use of the seven management and planning tools. He also served as a consultant to the Atlantic Fleet TQL teams as they began to work with their units.

In 1991, he joined the Office of the Under Secretary of the Navy's TQL Office as a technical advisor, researcher, and instructor. He is a member of the faculty responsible for training the Department of the Navy's TQL specialists and Senior Leaders Seminar instructors. He is a frequent guest speaker at TQL conferences and continues to write papers on quality issues, the most recent of which is Three Experts on Quality Management, which compares the management philosophies of Philip B. Crosby, W. Edwards Deming, and Joseph M. Juran.

Gerald is a member of the Deming Study Group in Washington, DC. In 1990 he was nominated and selected to Who's Who in the West. \*

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#### ABOUT THE TQL OFFICE

The mission of the Total Quality Leadership (TQL) Office, Office of the Under Secretary of the Navy is to assist the Department of the Navy leaders in their quality-focused improvement efforts through education, consultation, information sharing, networking, and technical advice.

The TQL Office provides technical advice as well to a number of organizations inside and outside of government. It has responsibilities in six key areas: TQL education and training; consultant services; new technologies; assessment; networking and liaison; and information and communication.

#### \*Education and Training

The TQL Office is responsible for managing the technical and conceptual content of the Department of the Navy (DON) TQL curriculum. This work involves designing and developing courses as well as training instructors. The staff advises the DON on integration of TQL material into the training pipeline.

#### \*Consultant Services

TQL Office members provide technical advice to the Under Secretary of the Navy and other senior Navy and Marine Corps leaders on the application of TQL principles and methods within the DON and on strategic planning. Advice may also take the form of recommendations on policy as well as on Defense Performance Review initiatives.

#### \*New Technologies

Technology can provide critical support to DON quality improvement efforts. The job of the TQL Office is to assess new technologies related to organizational change and process improvement and translate them into applications for the DON.

#### \*Assessment

Systems are needed to assess the way in which TQL implementation is enhancing mission accomplishment in DON organizations. The TQL Office is designing and developing feedback mechanisms for that purpose as well as developing innovative approaches to improve overall organizational effectiveness.

#### \*Networking and Liaison

The TQL Office has much to share with other organizations, both government and private, and much to learn from them. Staff members participate in TQL-related networks and professional organizations. As resources permit, the TQL Office sponsors TQL conferences and seminars.

#### \*Information and Communication

The TQL Office educates the DON about TQL policies and initiatives through a newsletter (TQLleader), articles and reports, and presentations at conferences and meetings. It is developing a computer-based quality information network to facilitate communication with DON organizations.

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